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# THE 1992 SECESSION MOVEMENT IN SOUTHWEST KANSAS

PETER J. McCORMICK

In May of 1992 the Kansas state legislature approved and Governor Joan Finney signed into law a new school finance formula that adversely affected several southwest Kansas counties. The new bill provided for a blanket mill levy of 32 mills (\$32 in taxes for every \$1000 assessed valuation) to be spread across the state. It also restricted funding to a maximum of \$3600 per student. The effects in the southwest were drastic. Many districts there, accustomed to setting their own tax rates and to retaining all monies collected, spent upward of \$5000 per student on tax levies below 20 mills. With the new formula, taxes collected from the 32 mills in excess of the \$3600 per-student limit would have to be released to

the state for disbursement. Alarmed southwest Kansans feared that local teachers would lose their jobs, courses would be cut, and some schools might be forced to close. It was apparent that the state legislature in far away Topeka had passed a measure that threatened the region.

In reaction to this tax, termed "selective" by many High Plains dwellers, talk of leaving the state materialized in an area roughly bound by Tribune, Great Bend, Coldwater, and Elkhart (Fig. 1). This rural, remote place, blessed with some of the richest farm land and largest mineral resources in the United States, has always been distinct from the rest of the state. Wheat, cattle, irrigation, and natural gas have provided a large tax base, which, in turn, has allowed the area to provide its relatively few citizens with excellent services on very low tax levies. Community buildings, roads, and schools are modern and well-kept. People identify with their school and towns thrive on school activities. The schools have provided well above average teacher salaries and sometimes pioneering educational services while accumulating large emergency funds.

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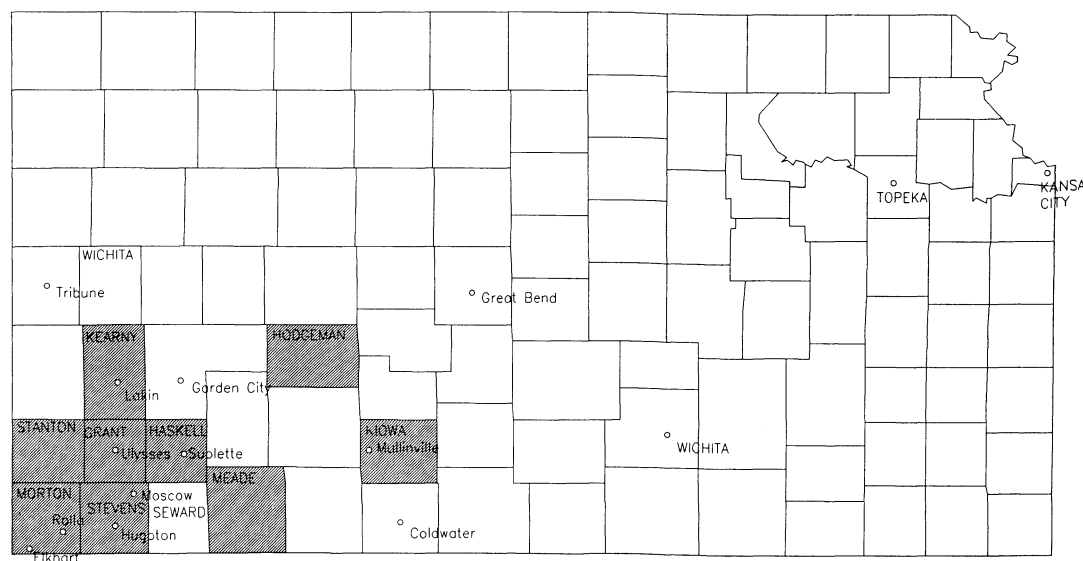


FIG. 1. Location of the several communities and counties of southwest Kansas affiliated with the 1992 secession movement. Shaded counties approved non-binding referendums to secede from the state.

The school finance formula rekindled century-old feelings of resentment and dislocation in regard to the state government and eastern Kansas. In the heart of southwest Kansas petitions signed by hundreds reached county commissioners within a matter of days after the proposal of the school tax plan. Kearny Countians, numbering just 4000 total, produced more than 500 valid signatures advocating secession. Headlines in local weekly papers talked of the tax, its implications, and the secession movement throughout the early months of 1992. Larger regional papers, such as the *Garden City Telegram* and *The Hutchinson News*, echoed the same refrain. The sign "To Hell With Topeka, Let's Secede" welcomed travelers on US Highway 50 at Lakin's Ken Ark Motel. The idea was widely supported, as reflected in the Kearny County petitions and similar petitions in Stevens and Morton counties.

The issue soon materialized into a grassroots political movement. Kearny, Stevens, and Morton counties were the first to take

action, holding non-binding advisory votes on the question of secession. High voter turnouts in all of these places revealed a remarkable depth of sentiment against the state government. Morton Countians, in the most southwestern extreme of the state, urged secession by a 1141-148 vote. Stevens and Kearny counties produced equally disproportionate totals. Election clerks in Hughton counted 1469 votes for and 73 against; in Lakin the vote was 1036 to 290.<sup>1</sup> The three initial tests were soon followed by votes in Grant, Haskell, Hodgeman, Kiowa, Meade, and Stanton counties. The anti-tax, pro-school sentiment prompted a coalition of business people, city councilors, local legislators, farmers, county commissioners, and many others to call for the creation of the "51st State."

#### HISTORICAL AND REGIONAL CONTEXT

The roots of the secession movement lie in the strong allegiance citizens of this area have to their schools, counties, and region. When

the state of Kansas suggested taking control of local institutions it set off an alarm, crystallizing a previously amorphous regional identity. Arguing for secession was a means of, and a vehicle for, expressing this identity. Economic promise and historical isolation from the rest of the state have developed an attitude of self-sufficiency in southwest Kansas. The inhabitants of the area live on land that was once termed desert, that frequently experiences drought, and that produced the Dust Bowl. It is also a place that has become prosperous—evident in the high land values assigned it for tax purposes.

Geographic and historical isolation separate the southwest from the northern and eastern parts of the state. The late arrival of railroads and the ominous physiography of sand hills and sharp escarpments mean that the southwest was the last area of the state to be settled. During the drought of the 1890s, it was also the first region in Kansas to be abandoned. Subsequent settlement of the region was markedly distinguished from that of the state as a whole. The good grazing attracted ranchers from the extreme southern limits of the state rather than farmers. They were accompanied by settlers from the South, particularly Missouri, Tennessee, and Kentucky. The rest of Kansas had generally been settled by those of a more northern heritage—many from Iowa, Illinois, and Massachusetts, for example. European settlement in the southwest was also much less significant than in other areas of Kansas. Scandinavian, German, and Russian settlers, for example, had extensively settled the central and northwestern portions of the state, but they rarely settled south of the Arkansas River.<sup>2</sup>

Mexican migrants have also had a marked influence on southwestern Kansas. During the 1920s hundreds of Mexican families migrated to places such as Garden City and Lakin to work sugar beet factories and fields watered by irrigation ditches.<sup>3</sup> Recent migrations to the southwest corner of the state have reinforced the importance of the Mexican-American culture in the region.<sup>4</sup> This Hispanic element

assures important cultural ties to places south and west of Kansas.

Contemporary southwest Kansas remains distinct and isolated. Grant County, the heart of the area, lies hundreds of miles, a good half-day drive, from Topeka, Wichita, or Kansas City. Many counties on the western fringe are serviced by out-of-state television and radio stations. *The Rocky Mountain News*, *Denver Post*, and the *Daily Oklahoman* lie alongside, or in place of, the *Wichita Eagle* and *The Hutchinson News* in local stores. *The Kansas City Star* and *Topeka Capital-Journal* are foreign. The original boundary between Mountain Time and Central Time was the 100th Meridian, which runs through Dodge City. At one time, most of southwest Kansas kept time an hour earlier than the rest of the state. State universities are missing from the area. The closest regent's school is Fort Hays State University, more than a three-hour drive from Ulysses. The University of Kansas and Kansas State University lie far to the east, and schools such as West Texas A&M, Oklahoma Panhandle State, Southern Colorado, and even Colorado at Boulder are more proximate to the High Plains than are the Kansas schools.

The contemporary regional identity of the area may also be influenced by images of fellow Kansans to the east. People from opposite ends of the state have less-than-positive attitudes about each other. Westerners enjoy their distinctions, and any attempt by eastern Kansans to meddle in their business is met "with scorn and resentment. They feel neglected by the government, looked down upon by the cities, and ridiculed by everyone."<sup>5</sup> To be looked down upon by your fellow state residents is reason enough to start looking for other options. Life on the High Plains is notably different from that in the Kaw Valley and the Salt Plains of central Kansas. Kansas is known widely as a midwestern state,<sup>6</sup> but it can be asserted that the High Plains of western Kansas are not wholly a part of this perception. There is frequent association in the southwest corner with the Dust Bowl and an

even stronger identification with the "High Plains." Surveys also reveal a general decline in midwestern allegiance in the region, and "the term High Plains may carry meaning to its residents beyond mere physical description."<sup>7</sup>

Talk of secession and feelings of dislocation from the rest of the state are not new in the southwest; given the many regional differences this is not surprising. In 1892 the *Kearny County Advocate* published an editorial proposing the creation of a state of "West Kansas" that would extend between the 100th and 104th meridian, and would stretch south from the Kansas-Nebraska line to include No-Man's land (Oklahoma Panhandle) and northeastern New Mexico (Fig. 2). According to the editorialist, "We favor the creation of a West Kansas for the reason that [the above area] is a scope of territory that is actuated by one common impulse. There would be no division of interests throughout the state, there would be a community of interest." The editorial was only a suggestion, and no social movement followed. It did, however, define a state on and of the High Plains and reverberate with a tune that would become familiar: "Western Colorado has no sympathy for Eastern Colorado, and Eastern Kansas has no sympathy for Western Kansas. . . ." The editor added that the only sympathy the eastern half of Kansas had with the west was in taxes. He noted that "we certainly have paid enough on their capitol building to satisfy our eastern brethren."<sup>8</sup>

By the late nineteenth century an infant southwest Kansas had distinguished itself from the rest of the state, and ties with Topeka have been quite tenuous ever since. Whenever the state government has implemented policy that adversely affects the region, the old unrest quickly surfaces. In the early 1980s the southwest was angered by the severance tax on minerals, nearly 80 percent of which comes from natural gas-blessed southwest Kansas.<sup>9</sup> A former state senator from the region, Leroy Hayden, commenting on the regional discord stirred up by the tax, noted

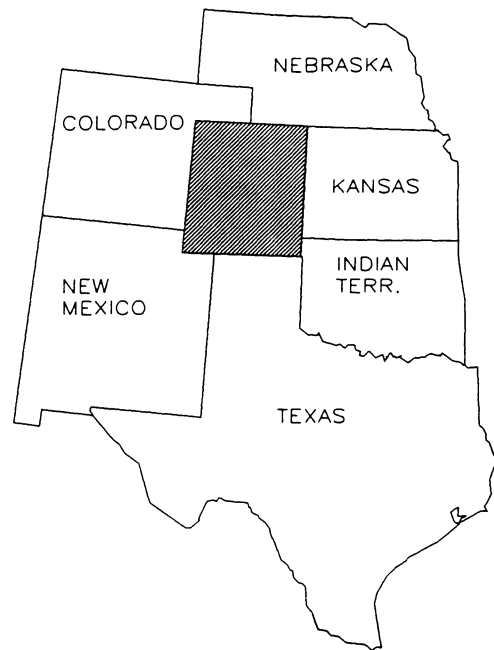


FIG. 2. Area suggested by Kearny County Advocate for inclusion in an 1892 state of West Kansas.

that "There's always been a feeling [in southwest Kansas] of 'Why don't we do something on our own?'"<sup>10</sup> The severance tax issue did not garner enough allegiance for a social movement, however, so it was not until 1992, and the issues of school taxes and control, that the citizenry of the area came together and called for change.

#### THE POLITICIZATION OF AN IDEA

The 1992 movement was much more involved and determined than previous grumblings. The drive sought partners in adjoining areas, inviting government leaders from counties in the Oklahoma panhandle, eastern

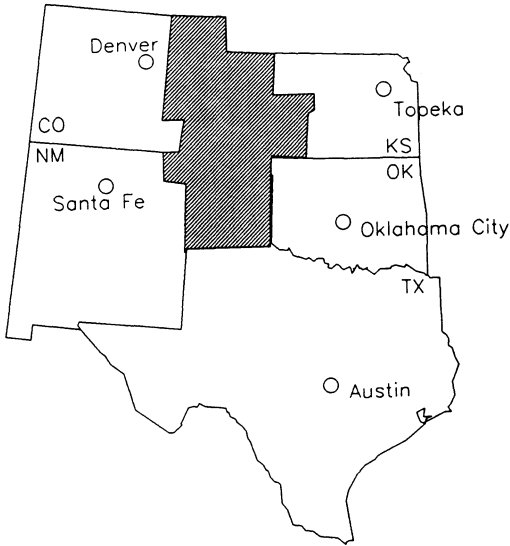


FIG. 3. Areas of Colorado, Kansas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas considered in the 1992 creation of a 51st State.

Colorado, northeastern New Mexico, and the Texas panhandle to discuss the issue (Fig. 3). These High Plains areas have much in common with southwest Kansas. Their economies are built on oil, gas, wheat, cattle, and irrigation. They are all remote from the government and population centers of their states. For example, Ulysses is nearly 370 miles by road from Topeka; Guymon is 265 miles from Oklahoma City; Springfield is 255 miles from Denver; and Dalhart is 560 miles from Austin. Being treated like a sometimes forgotten, sometimes exploited stepchild is a familiar experience in all regions. Citizens of Oklahoma's farthest western reach, Cimarron County, have complained for years; in the Texas panhandle,

a legislator proposed a local secession of twenty-six counties just one month before the movement in Kansas began.<sup>11</sup>

Leaders of the citizen's coalition who envisioned a new state met on 17 March 1992 at Garden City's Hilton Inn with delegates representing twenty-seven counties from Kansas, Colorado, and Oklahoma. The initial meeting defined the grievances the southwestern Kansans had against the lawmakers in Topeka. Many had expected the meeting to materialize into a "rallying call to mount the barricades and create a brave new 51st State,"<sup>12</sup> but to the dismay of the radicals, it was only a forum for slinging mud from one end of Kansas to the other. Complaints that the rural, southwest schools would have to support the larger, poorer districts in the east dominated conversation.

Taxation was the focus of the Kansans' discontent. The immediate school issue reminded people of the severance tax grievances of the 1980s. Speakers noted that secession would deny more than \$70 million dollars in oil and gas revenue to the Kansas state coffers. Others pointed out that area residents were being caught in political moves controlled by other Kansans, not themselves. Loss of control of school administration and school taxing remained the dominant issues for Kansans, but they did not gain any significant allegiance from counties from bordering states. With a purely Kansas dispute at the heart of the movement, a larger and nobler idea, that of an independent political entity representative of the High Plains, was discarded very quickly despite its potential. A Cimarron County commissioner reiterated that "We're interested and we think our people would be interested."<sup>13</sup> The short-lived attempt at secession in Texas and the continued feelings of dislocation in Colorado and New Mexico could easily have been tapped.

While southwest Kansans were losing outside co-conspirators, within the Sunflower State Robert Stephan, state attorney general, argued that the movement was unconstitutional and had no chance of succeeding. As he

told the press in March 1992, "You could petition the good Lord himself to secede, but it would be an exercise in futility."<sup>14</sup> He maintained that neither the statehouse nor the U.S. Congress would give the consent to secession that was mandatory for the creation of a new state out of parts of one or several existing states.

#### THE CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION

Despite setbacks, the movement trudged on in communities such as Rolla, Deerfield, and Sublette, where the general public and politicians joined committees to plan for the new state. Several meetings during the spring and summer of 1992 outlined grievances in detail and formulated constitutional proposals. By the end of the summer, a constitutional convention was set for 11 September in Ulysses.

On 11 September 1992 seven hard-core counties were represented at the convention: Haskell, Hodgeman, Kiowa, Meade, Morton, Stanton, and Stevens. Two others, Kearny County and Grant County, home of the convention, backed out in fear of legal implications. Others, such as Wichita and Seward, expressed interest, but made no formal association. Though the beacon of secession that had dominated the airwaves and newspapers on the High Plains now only seemed a flicker, the small delegation in Ulysses were determined. They voted on a new state name: West Kansas, a state bird: the pheasant, and a state flower: the yucca. They made a list of formal grievances to be sent to Governor Joan Finney.<sup>15</sup>

The meeting also produced the basics of a constitution and the proposed secession petition to the State of Kansas. The constitution addressed the contemporary discontent with the American political system and many of the issues found in the secession movement. It limited elected officials to two terms, allowed free secession, called for a balanced budget, banned exemptions from property tax, gave the governor line item veto power, and

provided for a two house legislature, one house based on population (no more than 5000 per district), the other on geographic area, probably county.<sup>16</sup>

The attempts to develop a "West Kansas" petition for separation were even more remarkable than the constitution. Kenneth Lester, a Hugoton delegate, moved "that this body continue their effort to support the formation of a 51st State and present a petition to the Kansas legislature in 1993." He continued that "If the legislature vetoes our petition to become a new state, then a new ballot should be submitted to the voters of each county to determine if the committee [for a new state] shall proceed."<sup>17</sup> A formal petition for secession was never presented to the Kansas legislature. During the early stages of the movement Representative Gene Shore of Stanton County had proposed an amendment in the House of Representatives that would make secession constitutional, but few legislators recognized the earnestness of Shore and the southwest counties, so the measure was defeated handily, 25 to 82. Most members "took Shore's proposal as a joke and milled about the chamber, chuckling over it."<sup>18</sup> A second attempt by Shore would likely have met the same response.

#### BOYCOTTS AND LAWSUITS

The lack of a petition for secession, a constitutional amendment, or even interest in seeking the second advisory poll, as outlined by the constitutional convention, showed the cause of West Kansas to be futile. Southwest Kansans, however, remained determined and sought alternative ways to protect their schools, including economic boycotts and lawsuits.

To defend themselves against the new formula for school finance and to protest other economic and social discrimination southwest Kansans perceived had been heaped upon them, leaders in the region threatened to retain all school tax, severance tax, and sales tax collections. The millions of dollars the

counties would retain would place the state in a financial bind. Attorney General Stephan proclaimed that “local officials don’t have the authority to withhold taxes due the state and, while they can do whatever they want to do, it’s not going to last for very long.”<sup>19</sup> He warned that he would move to oust public officials who retained tax revenues. Many local citizens and businesses countered by paying their property taxes in protest, a legal action in Kansas that in effect sets up something like an escrow account and hinders the state’s access to the funds. While the effects of this widely accepted form of dissent have not been measured, large companies such as Colorado Interstate Gas, as well as many private individuals, protested their taxes.

Southwest Kansas counties also passed resolutions to boycott counties represented by legislators who had voted for the school finance package. Morton County, in the first such ordinance, in early May 1992, proclaimed that it would “no longer buy any equipment or do business with those areas represented by Senators and Representatives who voted to kill Southwest Kansas.”<sup>20</sup> Grant and Kearny counties followed with similar resolutions, targeting Garden City, Dodge City, Wichita, Hutchinson, and even Kansas City and Topeka. The counties of southwest Kansas would now do their business elsewhere.

Though it might seem that an economic boycott would have little chance at success, the southwestern counties spend heavily on equipment and construction projects, sending millions of dollars to other regions of the state. Boycotters would now direct their money to local businesses or to companies in surrounding states. Lamar, Amarillo, and Colorado Springs, would get an even greater share of the market. Garden City and Dodge City, regional trade centers whose representatives had voted for the school finance bill, were prime targets for the boycotts. The county boycotts were followed by several city resolutions and a general grass-roots determination not to trade with the areas of Kansas that supported school finance reform.<sup>21</sup>

Protestors added legal action against the new finance formula to tax protests and boycotts. Nine southwest Kansas school districts formed a coalition, Kansans for Local Control, later the Kansas Education Coalition. The group complained that the new school finance formula was “unconstitutional and that the management of school systems by local school districts has been an integral part of Kansas life and education” and filed suit in Shawnee County District Court.<sup>22</sup> Their case was placed alongside suits involving the Blue Valley and Burlington school districts, both also adversely affected by the formula. When the Kansas supreme court ruled the funding formula constitutional in December of 1994, it acknowledged that the legislation represented a “major policy shift.” That “the magnitude of change contained in the act generated such a firestorm of protest in a number of areas is not surprising,” concluded the court.<sup>23</sup>

#### TAXATION AND THE 1992 SCHOOL FINANCE FORMULA

The 1992 formula for school finance levied a blanket 32-mill tax on all assessed property in the state. The taxes are turned over to the state of Kansas for disbursement to local districts, using a formula calling for \$3600 per full-time student to be returned to the districts. General funds of the state subsidize the new package via sales, income, and mineral taxes. Under the previous formula, local districts had had the responsibility to levy their own property taxes, and the poorer districts received subsidies from the state. A 32 mill levy shifts tax burdens throughout the state. Property poor districts with high enrollments saw major decreases in local tax obligations. Districts such as Chanute, Spring Hill, and Newton, in central and eastern Kansas, which had mill levies near or over 90 in the early 1990s, benefitted from the 1992 legislation.<sup>24</sup>

Property rich districts, such as Hugoton, Lakin, and Rolla, which had had mill levies below 25 and enrollments under 900, saw increases in property taxes. It could be argued



that property rich districts, such as Hugoton, could easily withstand the increase in the mill levy. The increases would not be drastic except in a few isolated districts, such as Moscow, where the levy more than doubled. Southwest Kansans, though, saw the formula as exploitive. They were bitter over the large amount of private property in eastern Kansas that has been exempted from taxes to spur economic development and especially with the new spending limit of \$3600 per student.

Most districts in southwest Kansas have relatively few students drawn from relatively large areas. They traditionally had spent much more per student than their eastern, more urban counterparts. In 1991 the districts of Moscow and Mullinville spent nearly \$10,000 per student.<sup>25</sup> Local school boards wanted the best facilities and equipment, and they wanted to attract quality instructors and to offer programs such as foreign languages that have to be brought to rural schools via expensive satellite and fiber optic networks. High transportation costs for activities, demanded by the long distances from school to school, also raised per pupil spending. Southwest Kansans proudly maintained their generous spending with small mill levies and with minimal or no state aid. Good schools were, and remain, a source of local pride.

Patrons screamed at the 1992 formula not only because of the loss of tax monies in the southwest districts but more on account of their inability to spend their own money. They saw that districts of equal size in eastern Kansas, such as Dexter in Cowley County, had levied five to six times the amount of taxes on their patrons and spent nearly \$3000 less per student.<sup>26</sup> The earlier tax formula had been unfair to Dexter students, but the new one simply seemed to reverse the injustice. If Moscow and Dexter each had to operate on \$3600 per student, Moscow patrons would now subsidize districts like Dexter at the expense of their own students. Moscow's budget would be slashed from \$1.3 million to just over \$500,000. For southwest Kansans the new for-

mula introduced new inequities, even though it had been praised in Topeka as equalizing educational opportunities across the state. Some relief appeared in amendments to the plan in 1993, including incentives for rural districts, such as the option to assess additional local tax monies up to 25 percent of the budget, transportation subsidies, and low enrollment weighting. The added incentives, however, did not mollify districts and patrons in the southwest.

Tax exemptions in eastern Kansas further angered the southwesterners. Many companies in eastern Kansas, mostly in urban areas such as Wichita and Topeka, are left off the property tax rolls. Over the last few decades, municipalities have been issuing industrial revenue bonds, or tax exemptions, to spur companies to build or expand, thus revitalizing local economies. The recipients start with giants such as Boeing, of Wichita, and go on and on. The value of these exemptions is quite large. For example, Sedgwick, the state's largest county, lists nearly \$2 billion worth of taxable property but just shy of \$3 billion of property not taxed—nearly one and one half times the valuation of the county and ten times the total valuation of Stevens County, the southwest's wealthiest. Of the state's nearly \$20 billion in valuation, \$4.76 billion are exempted from taxation, and almost 100 percent of the exemptions lie east of Hutchinson.<sup>27</sup>

The above numbers are startling to southwest Kansans. The property and mineral wealth of their home region is greatly overshadowed by the accumulation of untaxed property to the east. Southwest Kansans have argued that they could have given abatements to Northern Natural, Colorado Interstate, and the other natural gas companies that employ thousands in the southwest. They have not, and they do not feel they should have to subsidize eastern urban areas that have. To suggest that they cut their local school's spending because of someone else's abatements is unacceptable to them.

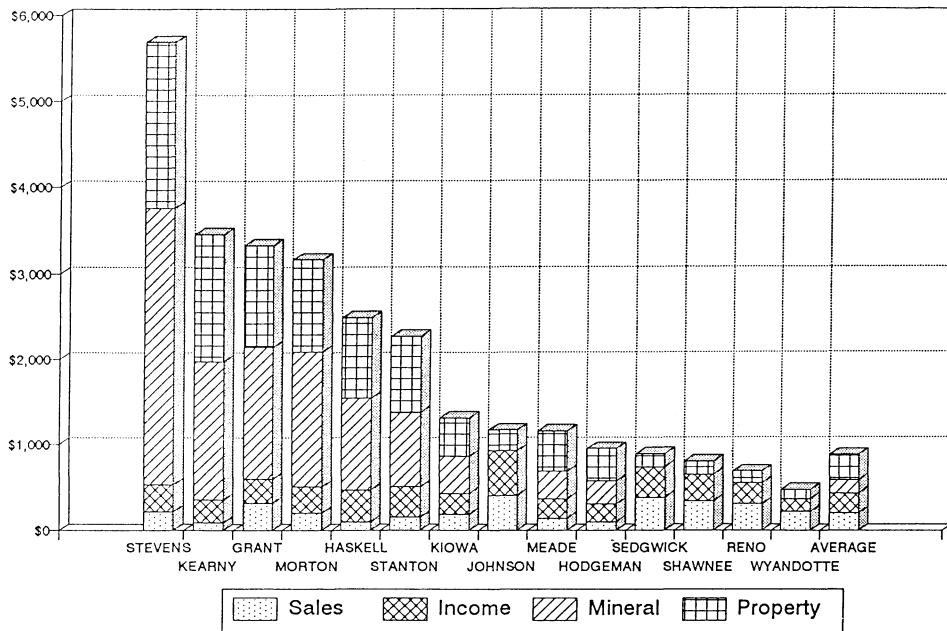


FIG. 4. Per-capita tax obligations for the new school finance formula. Secession leaders argued that the southwest part of the state was going to pay a disproportionate amount of taxes with the new formula, and proved it with this graph (Morton County Data Processing 1992).

With the 1992 school finance formula, the eastern half of Kansas saved more than \$300 million in property taxes, receiving 83 percent of all tax relief. Western Kansas saved roughly \$67 million, and the southwest districts saw actual increases in their mill levies.<sup>28</sup> The 1992 school finance formula includes a combination of property, income, mineral, and sales taxes. When looking at the per-capita distribution of taxes for the formula, one might expect that the contributions of sales and income taxes to the formula by the more populous eastern school districts would counter larger property taxes of the southwest districts. To the contrary, in the plan the average Kansan is obligated to about \$1000 in total taxes per year (Fig. 4). Sedgwick County, home of massive tax abatements, is about average. Stevens County taxpayers, in contrast, are obligated to more than \$5500 per head to fund the new formula and Kearny, Grant, and

Morton counties all have obligations of more than \$3000 per person.<sup>29</sup>

The key to the school tax issue is that the high-value land in southwest Kansas is inhabited by few people. Tax obligations are therefore more than three times higher there than they are in the rest of the state. If Sedgwick County did not abate several industries, its obligation would be nearly \$2500 per person under the formula, and if all abatements were abolished, southwest Kansas would not see so great a tax punch. In that case the blanket mill levy could be reduced and still raise adequate funds.

#### LOSS OF CONTROL

The combination of cuts in funding and increases in total taxes is reason enough for bitterness in southwest Kansas. What seems more important to local people, though, is loss

of control over their schools, and by extension, their lives. With the new formula, the state will regulate tax rates and virtually set school budgets, traditional prerogatives of local school boards. State-mandated budget cuts could produce cuts in salaries, athletic programs, and capital improvements that would be felt by entire communities. Dallas Bressler, a Morton County Commissioner and resident of the Rolla school district, has said simply, "The amount of money we're paying [as a result of the new mill levy] isn't the problem. The problem is the state telling us what we can and cannot do."<sup>30</sup>

Funding and control of local schools are powerful and emotional issues in southwest Kansas, but their loss has brought fears of even more drastic measures. Notions of school district consolidation have been floating throughout the statehouse in recent years and, with the 1992 finance package, came a report by the Special Committee on Assessment and Taxation on the consolidation of small, rural districts. Representative David Goosen, R-Goessel, noted that with the 1992 finance package and with further audits of the system "there will be a push for school consolidation" to rid smaller districts of excessive costs and create larger, more efficient districts. Such consolidations would probably occur in every county in southwest Kansas and be popular in Topeka.<sup>31</sup> Most southwest districts, their identity tied to their schools, would be reluctant to consolidate. As Bressler says, succinctly, "I'm in a little dinky town out here—population 500—and if the school closes, the town closes. It's all over."<sup>32</sup>

Consolidation of school districts could be the prelude to county consolidation and further loss of local control. For several years the state has been looking at the economics of running smaller counties. A 1991 study by Kansas, Inc., of the resources of counties with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants showed that most of them rely on some state subsidies. According to Charles Warren, then president of the company, "the state can no longer afford to subsidize county government for so few"

because "it is not fair to expect the other state residents [43 counties with more than 10,000 population] already burdened by their own local governments, to foot the bill."<sup>33</sup> This view is not taken kindly in the southwest, where only Finney, Ford, and Seward counties have more than 10,000 people.

Morton County commissioners issued a three-page statement bluntly refuting the study: "Warren has an uncanny knack of twisting figures to suit his own biased viewpoints." They also noted that every one of the members of Kansas, Inc.'s, board of directors lives east of Wichita. In many ways, the Morton County leaders are right. Given their high land values and mineral wealth, southwestern counties can be self sufficient if a reasonable public policy is established. The commissioners finished their letter by noting that "if consolidation must occur, begin with consolidation at the top,"<sup>34</sup> echoing the traditional discontent with the statehouse in Topeka. The arguments against county consolidation are emotional ones dealing with community identity. Local people agree that "a greater county allegiance exists on the High Plains than in America as a whole."<sup>35</sup> Administrative attempts to consolidate such institutions as hospitals and law enforcement have been futile in southwestern Kansas, so a political union between, say, Grant and Stanton counties would be extremely unpopular.

#### THE PAST AND THE FUTURE

Despite the strong allegiance to schools, counties, and the region, the 1992 secession movement ended rather quickly, as had the earlier ones. The real differences between the southwest and the rest of Kansas remain, however, as do issues of school control and unfair taxation. The Kansas Education Coalition, a group of 150 rural Kansas districts, many from the southwest, continues to protest the 1992 legislation and to lobby for local control and less budget control, though their arguments have been met with state mandated increases in property taxes.

Other potential problems loom for the southwest. Two major sources of wealth in the area—natural gas and water for irrigation—are terminal. The local water table in many areas has already fallen drastically since the time of settlement. Small family farms and ranches, historical mainstays in the region, have mostly given way to larger family and corporate operations, and “as farms grow larger, fewer, and more mechanized, fewer people are needed to maintain them.”<sup>36</sup> Though cattle-related industries have brought economic booms to Garden City, Dodge City, and Liberal, such industry is not only low-skilled and physically demanding but also water dependent and thus endangered.

Depopulation of the truly rural portions of southwest Kansas also continues. County seats and areas with access to ground water seem to be the only localities gaining or even retaining population.<sup>37</sup> Although several of the secession-minded counties are gaining population, limited resources in the region suggest that this growth cannot be sustained. With the depletion of water, and eventually natural gas, it appears that the current way of life of the High Plains “is dying a natural, inevitable death.”<sup>38</sup>

The end of the current lifestyle in the region was foreshadowed by Frank and Deborah Popper in 1987 when they brought forth the idea of the “Buffalo Commons.” Although the idea of the High Plains as desert has been part of American lore since the early nineteenth century, these eastern predictors of the depopulation of the Great Plains seemed the ultimate doomsayers to inhabitants of southwest Kansas. Returning the marginal, waterless, eroded land to the buffalo and pronghorn is even more threatening than the notion of Topeka taking over the schools. It could be that this threat will materialize just as the latter has, and that attempts to secede from the future could be as futile as the attempt to secede from the state.

Southwest Kansans understand their lifestyle is in jeopardy. Deep down they probably would agree with the Poppers that “the

small towns in the . . . countryside will wither and die. The rural Plains will be virtually deserted.”<sup>39</sup> Several small towns in the southwest corner of Kansas fulfill the Poppers’ prediction, yet they are still home to a few, proud, die-hard people, many of whom were integral to the 1992 secession movement. These Kansans have a distinct identity—an attachment to their land, an independence, a camaraderie with adjacent areas on the High Plains, and a hostility toward the east—that will probably endure for some time.

#### NOTES

The author wishes to thank James R. Shortridge for his comments on earlier drafts of this article and for sharing parts of a then unpublished manuscript on settlement in Kansas.

1. Morton County, Kansas, Data Processing, miscellaneous data, 1992, data processing office, Elkhart, Kansas.

2. James R. Shortridge, *Peopling the Plains: Who Settled Where in Frontier Kansas* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995).

3. *Ibid.*

4. Donald Stull, Michael Broadway, and Ken Ericson, “The Price of a Good Steak,” Louise Lamphere, ed., *Structuring Diversity: Ethnographic Perspectives on the New Immigration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 35-64.

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